

A vertical photograph of a night sky. A bright, multi-pointed star is in the upper left corner, with a thin vertical line of light extending downwards from it. The sky is a deep blue with many small, faint stars. At the bottom, the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees are visible against the sky.

Hope
Peace

Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2020

Prelude: Nunn Komm der Heiden Heiland

Dietrich Buxtehude

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

The Lord is near! Prepare the way of the Lord!
All people everywhere, let us make ready to enter God's presence.
For the Lord is holy, pure and righteous.
God's glory fills this place.
God calls us to truth, mercy and peace.
Hearts that are just and kind please God.
Let us enter God's presence with humility.
The Lord is near! Prepare the way of the Lord!

Opening Hymn: "Of the Father's Love Begotten"

1 Of the Father's love begotten, Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the Source, the Ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been.
And that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!

2 O that birth forever blessed, When the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving, Bore the Savior of our race;
And the babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed his sacred face, evermore and evermore!

3 This is he whom heav'n-taught singers, Sang of old with one accord,
Whom the Scriptures of the prophets, Promised in their faithful word;
Now he shines, the long expected;
Let creation praise its Lord, evermore and evermore!

4 O ye heights of heav'n, adore him; Angel hosts, his praises sing:
All dominions, bow before him And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Ev'ry voice in concert ring, evermore and evermore!

5 Christ, to thee, with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving and unwearied praises be,
Honor, glory, and dominion
And eternal victory, evermore and evermore!

A Time of Prayer:

Holy God, we enter this sacred space and time with expectation — expectation of your coming, expectation of hearing you speak to us a word for our lives that

is new and renewing, expectation of being challenged and changed. We lay aside any expectation of being entertained, of being made comfortable, of being served rather than serving others. Your kingdom is near, and you have entrusted to us, your church, the responsibility of exemplifying the love, forgiveness, justice, compassion and peace that are signs of it. May we embody your kingdom with faithfulness and joy, we pray. Amen.

The Lighting of the the Candle of Peace:

We gather with hope around the Advent wreath with hearts waiting for the Christ child. Let us gather with hearts open and hopeful. Today we light the second candle, the Candle of Peace. May it be for us a reminder that Christ gives the peace which passes all understanding. Let the hope in our hearts pave the way for peace.

In the gospel of John, let us remember these words of Christ: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."

As we light the Candle of Peace, may the candle be lit in our hearts, that we might give the peace of Christ to one another. (The Candle of Peace is lit in silence)

Let us pray: God of us all, we are painfully aware of the world around us which is filled with strife and unrest. We confess we often live our lives in fear rather than faith. We pray that these flickers of hope and peace might light a flame in our hearts, so that others might be warmed by your love. In this time of holy waiting, let it be so. Amen.

Reception of New Members:

In the life of the Christian Church with give thanks for those moments when we can celebrate our faith and commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ through baptism, confirmation, and affirmation of faith. Today we celebrate that one young man has chosen to enter into service of the life and mission of this church by being received into membership of this congregation.

I invite now Roland B. Larsen to join me now as he affirms his baptism and is welcomed into the life of the church.

On behalf of the Church universal I ask you:

Do you desire to affirm your baptism into the faith and family of
Jesus Christ?

Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of
new life in Christ?

Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

Do you promise to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ?

Do you promise according to the grace given to you, to grow in the Christian faith and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ?

By your baptism you were made one with us in the body of Christ, and now do you promise to participate in the life and mission of this faith community.

In the name of Jesus Christ, and on behalf of this church, Rollstone Congregational Church, we extend to you the hand of Christian love, welcoming you into the fellowship of this church. *(extending of the right hand of fellowship by the Moderator and Pastor)*

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

- 40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
- 3 A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'
- 6 A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.
9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'
10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Musical Interlude:

Polish Lullaby Carol

Edwin Arthur Kraft

The Message:

“Dream the World Better”

Perhaps you dream of traveling to Lake Como in Northern Italy and having lunch with superstar George Clooney and his wife Amal. Or maybe driving a Lamborghini that has been signed by the pope.

If so, your dreams really could come true.

According to Fast Company magazine, an online global sweepstakes platform has raised money for everything from local homeless organizations to the United Nations Children’s Fund. It links these worthy organizations with dreamy prizes such as the Clooney lunch and the Pope-signed luxury car. Then it runs a sweepstakes that raises a lot of money for charity, while delivering a dream prize to a lucky winner.

Called Omaze, the online platform is a for-profit company that takes a percentage of the overall sweepstakes donations. Since 2012, Omaze has raised over \$130 million for more than 350 charities. Its motto: **“Dream the world better”**.

So, what is your dream? A photoshoot with Annie Leibovitz in which you take a selfie together?

A road trip through the Pacific Northwest in a 2020 Corvette C8?

Enjoying coffee with American filmmaker, painter, actor David Lynch and then being drawn by him?

Winning and customizing a tiny home?

Your dream could come true, thanks to Omaze. And you’d be supporting a worthy cause as well, such as planting trees in the Amazon rainforest or providing clean water to communities in Kenya or Haiti.

Dream the world better.

The prophet Isaiah had a similar desire but a different approach. In the 40th chapter of his book, Isaiah had a vision or dream in which he saw the Lord God in heaven, speaking to a group of supernatural beings. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Isaiah must have had one of those coveted positions in which you get paid to sleep. You know: A dream job.

The prophet shared his vision after delivering 39 chapters of warnings to Israel. Isaiah had told the people to seek justice and put their faith in God, but they had been rebellious. As a result, he predicted that all the treasures of the king “shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord” (39:6). Sure enough, the nation was conquered by Babylon, and the people were carried off into exile.

But this period of defeat and loss was not the end of the story. Isaiah dreamed the world better by sharing his vision of God’s heavenly words. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,” God said to the supernatural beings all around, “and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (40:2). God was saying that the people of Israel had paid a great price for their sins of injustice and unfaithfulness. Their time of punishment was now over, and nothing more would be required of them.

When God forgives, the slate is wiped clean. For them, and for us.

Then a voice cried out in the heavenly council: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be

revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (vv. 3-5).

A great desert wilderness stood between Babylon and Jerusalem, and this voice called for the creation of a highway for God, one in which the people could travel home. This way in the desert is God’s way, says Old Testament professor and scholar Christopher Seitz of Toronto School of Religion. “This way is the way of restoration, and it belongs to God.”

The way of restoration is the highway created for God’s people. Defeat was being replaced by victory, sin by forgiveness, and loss by restoration. Years later, Luke spoke of the word of God coming to John the Baptist in the wilderness: “He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”’” (Luke 3:3-4).

Baptism of repentance. Forgiveness of sins. The way of John is also the way of restoration, and it belongs to God. John dared to dream the world better.

So where do we need restoration today? The apostle Paul looked forward to the day when all creation “will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21), and we know what he is talking about. We look around and see the fouling of air, land, and water. We look at our relationships and see brokenness between friends, colleagues, spouses, and family members. We look inside ourselves and see the decay of our morals and our aspirations. We know we need restoration in so many areas of life: Ecological, relational, ethical and spiritual. Each of us needs the message of hope that Isaiah and Luke delivered with the words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

So many crooked things need to be straightened out, and we know that we cannot do it alone. In Isaiah’s vision, a voice says, “Cry out!” And Isaiah said, “What shall I cry?” The message: “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:6-8). Isaiah knows that we humans are like grass that withers away, but the word of our God is rock-solid and eternal. When we open ourselves to the power of God’s word, when we let it touch us and transform us, we are straightened out and restored.

Remember that on the first day of creation, God made the powerful light that is absolutely essential for life, using only the words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). God saw that the light was good, and then God separated the light from the darkness. God used a set of words to bring order out of chaos — creative speech that God has continued to offer through all of history.

God has continued to speak through the words of prophets such as Isaiah, through the proclamation of messengers such as John the Baptist, and most powerfully through the teachings of Jesus, the Word of God in human form (John 1:14). In the chaos of 21st-century crookedness and decay, we need these divine words more than ever.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech during the 1963 March on Washington, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, “We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” The crowd responded to the emotion of the prophet Amos, and biographer Taylor Branch reports that King could not bring himself to deliver the next line of his prepared speech.

Some of the people on the platform urged him on, and the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson called out as though she were in church, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin.” Branch says that King began to preach, and his words “went beyond the limitations of language and culture.” His “Dream” message took him from Amos to Isaiah, and he ended with the words, “I have a dream that one day, every valley shall be exalted.”

Yes, words create reality. The words of Isaiah dreamed the world better, and then Jesus Christ made those words real. Jesus is, for us, the Word of God made flesh, and we can be thankful that “the word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8). Jesus forgives our sins, wipes our slates clean, straightens us out, and gives us hope for the future.

All we have to do is receive him, believe in him, and walk behind him. Jesus is the one that Isaiah was talking about when he said, “lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9).

Jesus is Isaiah’s dream come true, the one who fulfills the prophecy: “See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. ... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (Isaiah 40:10-11). That’s Jesus, the one who possesses God’s might but also feeds his flock like a shepherd. He is the One who has the power to straighten us out, but also the grace and love to restore us.

When the birth of Jesus is celebrated again this Christmas, remember the words of Isaiah: “Here is your God!” Jesus joins Isaiah in bringing you back from exile, wherever you may be wandering in a far-off land. Jesus does the work of restoration, forgiving you and giving you new life. He makes the rough places smooth and the crooked ways straight.

Isaiah dreams the world better, and Jesus brings those dreams to life.

Musical Interlude: Variation I on “Creator of the Stars of Night”

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

Holy God, Creator of the universe, Redeemer of heaven and earth, Sustainer of life, we are awed at the promise of Immanuel, God with us. The story of the Incarnation is comforting in its familiarity to us, but the promise and its fulfillment are no less extraordinary today than they were on a starry night 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. Merciful God, we need your incarnate presence among us today. We need an encounter with the Holy. We need to be reminded that we will not find the truth of who you are in tinsel, bright lights or gleaming holiday parties, but only in the stillness of our hearts where we can hear you say, “Do not be afraid.” As we prepare to receive you anew and afresh, quiet us and attune our spirit to your Spirit, we pray, for the sake of your Son, Jesus. Who taught us to pray to you in saying....

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Sharing in the Breaking of the Bread and the Receiving of the Cup of Forgiveness

Let us confess our sins.

God of peace, who sent light into the world in the coming of Jesus Christ: We confess that we have not followed the light given to us. We have not searched for signs of your love, or trusted the goodness of your good news. We have failed to praise your Son’s birth as we have refused his peace on earth. We have expected little and hoped for less. Forgive our doubt, and renew in us all fine desires so we may watch and wait and once more hear the glad story of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

Friends, know and believe, that as we wait for the birth of the baby Jesus — and the return of our Savior — we are already forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.

We remember that on the night of betrayal and desertion, Jesus took bread, gave you thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples saying, “This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way, Jesus took a cup, after supper saying: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Through the broken bread we participate in the body of Christ.
Through the cup of blessing we participate in the new life Christ gives.

Eat this bread, for it is the body of Christ, broken for you.
Drink of this cup, for it is the blood of Christ, shed for you.

Holy God, we thank you for having invited us to this table where our eyes and hearts have been opened to the gifts you offer to us through Jesus Christ. May this season of Advent strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and let us show forth your praise in our lives. Amen.

Closing Hymn: “The Word Made Flesh”

The Word of flesh has dwelt among us, full of grace and full of truth.
We behold His wondrous glory of the only Son of God.
We have beheld His glory, and we have seen the light.
Anointed Prince of glory, we marvel at thy sight.

The Word of flesh has dwelt among us, from His fullness we received,
Grace on grace and lasting mercy, truth and wisdom, hope and peace.
We have beheld His glory, and we have seen the light.
Anointed Prince of glory, we marvel at thy sight.

Benediction:

May the Lord make you increase in love for one another, nurturing one another in our community of faith, uplifting one another in times of struggle or sorrow, sharing with one another in all that you possess.

May the Lord make you abound in love for all, giving of yourselves the way Christ gives to you, witnessing to the ever-widening circles of God's love, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, who breathes life into all of God's children.

May the Lord make love grow within you and extend to all around you, as together we await his coming.

Postlude:

Prelude in E Minor

JS Bach

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Jerilyn Hoffman
Linda Hurd
Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Family of Carol Maki

Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Arlene Sirois
Diane Staples
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Church and all of its members and friends

**All members of our armed forces who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty**

Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein